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ABSTRACT

The dynamics of the teacher labor market were examined, focusing upon the problems of which teachers leave the profession, why they leave, where they go, and what it would take to retain them as public school teachers. In-depth case studies were made of six universities and six school districts. Data were collected by interviews (n=180) with deans, professors, placement officers, education students, administrators, principals, and teachers in the school systems. The study highlighted the fact that the present teacher labor market remedies such as career ladders and incentive pay plans do not address the significant variables of: (1) teacher recruiting methods by school systems and universities; (2) mobility patterns of teachers; (3) characteristics of teachers sought by school systems; (4) expectations, life styles, and attrition of teachers; (5) working conditions in the schools; and (6) teacher role-modeling for public school students. It is pointed out that school systems vary widely in the needs of their students and what they expect of teachers. Differences between rural and urban school systems are noted, and policy recommendations are made for recruiting and holding teachers suitable to the needs and expectations of school systems. (JD)

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THE QUALITATIVE CRITIQUE

OF

TEACHER LABOR MARKET STUDIES

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1983 National Commission on Excellence in Education's A Nation At Risk, research on the problems of the teacher labor market has been well publicized. The focus of much of this research has been the quantitative analyses of the academic ability of the teacher work force (Schlechty and Vance, 1981, 1982, 1983; Weaver, 1983). These studies have underscored the following alarming conditions: (1) the SAT scores of students who plan to teach have declined sharply over the last decade (Schlechty and Vance, 1981), and (2) teachers who score high on measures of academic ability are more likely to leave the classroom then their "less able" colleagues (Schlechty and Vance, 1982). Further, survey research findings demonstrate supply and demand imbalances in such "critical" subject areas as math and science (Guthrie and Zusman, 1982; Akin, 1983).

Though these studies have been illuminating, researchers' and policy makers' general acceptance of the rational economic concept that "talent will eventually flow to opportunity" (Weaver, 1983, p. 22) has led to policies such as career ladders and incentive (merit) pay programs in an effort to attract, reward, and retain quality public school teachers. Since these studies generally have been limited to survey research or "head counts" (Bird, 1984) and statistical analyses of existing data bases (such as the analysis of the National Longitudinal Study by Schlechty and Vance, 1981), it is largely true that:

> The right questions have not been identified before data collection efforts began, or the available data have not the examined and analyzed adequately to discover the underlying trends, causes and effects . . . . (Bird, 1984, p. ii)

Bird (1984) goes on to argue that:

> to be useful to policy makers, it should explore the relationships among variables which affect the market and identify effective options for control and adjustment of supply and demand conditions. This means going beyond collection of the simple descriptive data and beginning the complex process of analyzing the behavioral and institutional characteristics of the teacher labor market (Bird, 1984, p. ii).

In essence, Bird's critique of the teacher labor market studies indicates that the "numbers" research is limited to factors that are tangential to the problem and ignores the effects of contexts, while his call for qualitative research points to the need to uncover the factors impacting upon the problems and the causes. Taking heed of Bird's critique, it is our intent to demonstrate that a qualitative analysis of the teacher labor market has the

> capacity to go beyond already existing questions to refine them or to transform the questions to render them more meaningful and potentially more powerful (Wilcox, 1981, p. 41).

THE QUALITATIVE CRITIQUE

The qualitative critique has two basic strands. On the one hand, quantitative research is most appropriately used to set "puzzles," not solve them (Turner, 1980). Initially, our investigations were designed, in part, based on the puzzles the quantitative research presented. While it is a useful thing to have puzzles set, the important issue concerns the solution (explanation) of the puzzle. As Turner (1980) argued, the solution of puzzles is an interpretive problem that essentially employs a comparative method. Thus, the first qualitative critique is the inability of the quantitative research to provide an interpretive framework based on the actual conditions of the teacher labor market. In basic research that tests hypotheses deduced from theory, the issue is not as dramatic as in policy research. In policy research, we shape the discourse of the problem

definition and policy solution. This requires a grounded framework which encompasses the extant situation rather than labor market theories.

The second strand of the qualitative critique of the teacher labor market studies concerns the problem of even setting a puzzle via quantitative methodologies. Since quantitative approaches cannot essentially learn more than they can anticipate initially, we are left with the problem of the nature of puzzles being set. Certainly, theoretical and methodological sophistication can reassure us that puzzles are not arbitrary, but they do not ensure us they are valid. To the extent to which we let quantitative research set the puzzles we examine here, it may be that our error was in not discovering issues that have taken-for-granted status. It is these same issues that are more likely to have dramatic effects on teacher labor markets. In short, puzzles set by the rules of positivism may lack validity except for the purposes of theory testing.

Based on this critique, we set out to conduct qualitative studies of the teacher labor market. In what follows we discuss our approach and what we learned. Primarily we learned that quantitative research had set puzzles that tend to ignore the dynamics of the teacher labor market. As a result, the policy implications of our research are rather different from those currently being considered.

THE SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

A case study methodology was utilized to understand the situational context of the teacher labor market in the Southeast and hopefully to provide "meaning to the numbers." In-depth studies of 12 institutions (6 universities and 6 school systems) that are involved directly in the identification, recruitment, and selection of public school teachers were

selected to capture geographic, economic, and cultural diversity in the region. (See Tables A and B for details of our sample.)

The case studies were developed by synthesizing interviews, documents, and field observation data collected in the 12 sites. The informants interviewed (n=180) included deans, professors, placement officers, and students in the education units of the universities and central office administrators, principals, and teachers in the school systems. A representative range of teachers and education students based on sex, race, grade level, and subject matter was selected to be interviewed (see Berry, 1984, for more details).

A follow-up study of teacher attrition in the largest of the 6 school systems studied (a major metropolitan school district with 70,000 students and over 4,000 teachers) was conducted to elaborate on the original cases and to delineate (1) which teachers leave, (2) why they leave, (3) where they went, and (4) what it would have taken to retain them as public school teachers. Initially, an attempt was made to interview by telephone all teachers who had resigned in the 1983-84 academic year. Of these 210 teachers, an approximate 5 percent turnover rate for the district, 82 were interviewed and 45 of the remaining 128 (who had disconnected telephone numbers) responded to a mail survey. This was a 60 percent response rate (see Berry, 1985 for more details).

UNCOVERING THE DYNAMICS AFFECTING THE TEACHER LABOR MARKET

Briefly, our study has highlighted that the present teacher labor market remedies such as career ladders and incentive pay plans do not address the significant variables of (1) teacher recruiting by systems and universities; (2) mobility patterns of teachers; (3) characteristics of teachers sought by

school systems; (4) expectations, life styles, and attrition of teachers; (5) working conditions in schools; and (6) teacher role modeling for public school students. The assumptions implicit within policies such as career ladders and incentive pay programs are that the best teachers do not enter teaching or that the best teachers exit the occupation early because of a lack of career opportunity and pecuniary gain. As we delineate the findings of our study, we ask you to consider the above assumptions that are implicit in the policies generated from quantitative research.

Recruiting

University education officials, as well as those in school systems, reported that they "essentially do nothing" in terms of recruiting students to education programs and to the public schools. Some universities have noted that they rely on their reputations as research institutions and teachers'colleges. Further, officials of traditionally black universities stated they have "give[n] up" on their recruiting since their minority students might not be able "to attain the NTE cutoff score for entry." Nevertheless, these same students were able to enter the chemistry program, maintain good grades, be recruited by industry, and "be sent [to graduate school] in chemical engineering" by the employing industry.

While most school systems reported having a plethora of "applicants on file," officials in urban systems tend to "assume the right people will walk in the door . . . as people are leaving, people are coming." In these areas, there have been "built-in supplies" because "industry and universities attract able spouses," and many "applicants who are 30-38 years old," "experienced," and "their children are grown" have been returning to the classroom. As one urban school official noted, "In many cases, the divorce has necessitated [these teachers] going back to work." Consequently, these

urban system administrators asserted a "need to recruit people in areas where there is not enough depth of the pool." Another system official noted, "We may hire 30 to 40 math and science [per year], and our reservoir is 50."

On the other hand, rural school systems have relied either on those "want[ing] to come home and teach in [their] rural settings" or on the "informal networks" as the best way "to find good teachers." However, rural systems have not competed for the top minority candidates since urban administrators, with local money and positions, argued that they "can court and sign outstanding people" early in the "recruiting season" and later place them in the most appropriate vacancy. But more importantly, recruiting in all systems was somewhat limited since turnover was low. (Officals reported turnover rates of 2.0 to 5.0 percent.)

Mobility

In some respects, the largest school system in terms of students and budget reported that they only "spend $2,500" a year recruiting because they recognized the immobility of education students and teachers. Urban students wanted to teach "back home," in their university town, or in a place like their university town. Rural students were even less mobile. A university official epitomized this situation by stating most rural students "want to teach only back home . . . sometimes working as aides or substitute teachers" until a job opens. However, some rural students who attended urban universities did not want to return home because there were reportedly "not many job openings." More importantly, they recognized both that their "philosophy doesn't click" in rural areas and that there are "things to do" in their university town. This was a common pattern; the rural students of "high quality" (who chose to become doctors or lawyers) leave their home

towns, attend urban universities, and also "never return." In fact, one rural teacher characterized the "impossible" task in attracting and retaining urban students to become teachers in their system, by exclaiming:

What's a young person to do here on Saturday night?

The limited mobility patterns of students were compounded by teacher mobility preferences which were demarcated by the needs of the nuclear family for those in urban areas and the needs of the extended family for those in rural areas. Many urban teachers left their positions primarily because of "spouse moves" and child rearing. (One teacher moved with her husband 6 times in 10 years.) On the other hand, many rural teachers stayed in their positions because "daddy lives right down the road," and some "can't afford to stay home" with their children. While retirements accounted for considerable urban and rural turnover, some teachers from isolated rural systems left because there was no nearby university at which to pursue a graduate program in education.

Characteristics

School system officials reported they were not necessarily interested in prospective teachers with "the best academic qualities." They wanted those with "a certain amount of intelligence," but more importantly, the teachers needed to be able to "relate to children and parents," "organize," "discipline," "withstand pressure," and be involved in extracurricular activities. In many cases, those who were "very bright" were not necessarily what system officials needed or wanted. An inner-city principal noted that some of the "best" candidates "turned out to be terrible as [they] don't expect enough . . . just can't handle people." Rural administrators sought non-academic characteristics in teachers. They "wouldn't want a Ph.D. from DuPont" because to teach effectively in their communities, teachers:

> have tolove the church . . . not like life in the fast lane . . . have a real appreciation [for those who are] poor and illiterate . . . . Talk about teaching the whole child--our teachers really have to do it.

All school system administrators recognized the need to find "good" coaches since they are "real hard to find." With "twenty different sports and 80-member marching band[s]," systems had to: (1) "make" positions for potential coaches, (2) "hire PE teacher[s]--[because] most of them are certified in biology or physical sciences, too," and (3) "terminate" physic[s] teachers if they "give up their coaching" assignment.

Expectations, Life Styles, and Attrition

Most teachers were influenced to teach by their own public school teachers and displayed the same fervor toward the occupation as their mentors. A second grade teacher related stories about her second grade teacher, a chemistry teacher talked about the close interaction with her teacher in the lab, and a coach talked about his coach. Many teachers decided to teach because they "saw the light," and they were determined to "mold the minds of children."

In essence, teachers stayed in teaching because "they are good at it," their "husbands are in the area," they "love working with kids," teaching "is as good a job as [one] can find around [the community]," and it "gives [them] time to vacation and have time with their children." These teachers reported that they "love working in an environment that caters to kids" and "would not consider an 8 to 5 job until [their own] children are grown." For most, industry was considered "too impersonal." Many teachers reported being attracted to working with children or adolescents, rather than with adults. For example, a science teacher who worked with a utility company because of her "fantasy of the chemist in the white lab coat" quickly returned to the

classroom since it was "dirty, dirty, work" at the utility company. Finally, many urban teachers whose husbands had "good jobs" considered their "salaries [as] gravy." On the other hand, for teachers who came from rural and blue-collar backgrounds, teaching provided a "very good income."

Of the teacher respondents who had left the largest school system in our study, 69 percent were either teaching (in other systems), at home, or retired. The others who left for other occupations were primarily in sales (real estate or insurance), self-employed (primarily with their spouses), or conducting training for industry. For those who left for these jobs, money and career opportunity were not the primary reasons for their dissatisfactions. Instead, these teachers cited the many negative aspects of their working conditions.

Working Conditions

If teachers left because of dissatisfactions, it was usually because they "can't handle disadvantaged kids" (an inner-city high school principal) or they were "frustrated with the lack of disciplinary action taken by administrators" (a resigning high school calculus teacher). The frustrations of these teachers stemmed more from the perception that schools were "demanding" and "stressful" places to work, not that they were vastly underpaid or did not have opportunities for career growth. Since "there is less discipline now and more questioning of authority," teachers believed they were not respected by parents, administrators, or students. Similarly, many saw their problems relating to the fact that "education is not the number-one priority for families today," their "principal has the backbone of a jellyfish," they are "not treated as professionals," or they were "called a white-goddamned-son-of-a-bitch one too many times." Another simply noted: "Paperwork, paperwork, paperwork." As one English teacher who was forced to

retire because of her "nerves" asserted, "I know I could have taught better if I didn't have to raise $8,000 for the Junior-Senior prom."

Many of their frustrations were rooted in the fact that they had "no planning period . . . a lack of disciplinary support, too many responsibilities, inadequate supplies, too much after-school work . . . and [were] disturbed over the value of mediocrity [in the school and system]." Being responsible for minors was a major source of dissatisfaction because "once you hit campus [you are] a slave" to the children. One high school calculus teacher who left because of "burnout due to the lack of rewards or pats on the back" noted that she had to "keep the computer lab open before and after school, during lunch, and at break." A former junior high math teacher who entered sales reported that for her:

> It was not the money . . . . The reason goes much deeper. I wasn't valued or appreciated . . . . The school system appreciated the job I did, I would go back.

For many teachers, discipline was an immense problem because "teachers and administrators are afraid of kids," and one "has to be an attorney" to discipline a student. As one former teacher noted, "It is not just educators and policitians . . . but parents . . . The second television is more important than a tutor."

Role Modeling

While teachers were "frustrated," they felt "trapped" since they were "dependent," had "invested years [in teaching]," had husbands in the area, and had "a house and a mortgage." Unlike their mentors, today's teachers reported being alienated from their occupation and more inclined to "recruit [their] students away from teaching" (see Berry, 1984, 1985). While they stayed committed to the occupation for a plethora of reasons, their

frustrations are presently turning off tomorrow's teacher labor pool--today's public school student. In fact, our analysis led us to believe that this negative role modeling by today's teacher may be the most dynamic variable affecting the teacher labor market and the one that should be addressed by policies designed to manipulate favorable conditions for attracting and retaining teachers.

SUMMARY AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In summary, the variables affecting the teacher labor market are far more complex and subtle than most researchers, analysts, and decision-makers may believe, and that ensuring an adequate supply of competent teachers may involve more factors than providing higher salaries and career ladders. It seems possible that quantitative studies, which have been the impetus for current reforms, miss the mark since they are restricted to predetermined categories and questions. Subsequently, recent analyses of the teacher labor market have focused on the seemingly moot question, "Why do teachers leave?" while ignoring many salient questions--including:

(1) What are the dynamics of entry, exiting, and re-entry of teachers?

(2) How do these dynamics vary in different geographical, economical, and cultural contexts?

(3) What teacher characteristics are actually desired and needed by various school systems?

(4) What are the effects of working conditions on teacher mobility and job satisfaction?

(5) Given the above, "Why do teachers stay?"

It is our belief that qualitative responses to these questions have begun to uncover the factors impacting upon the problems and causes of the teacher labor market. These factors included:

(1) Essentially low turnover rates were artificially increased by urban teachers who continually exit and reenter teacher labor markets because of spouse moves, marital separation, child rearing or returning to graduate school. On the other hand there was little mobility among rural teachers since in large part they chose to teach in the communities from whence they came.

(2) In urban and economically advantaged areas school systems had been able to take advantage of industry bringing in "able spouses" and the availability of teacher certification through local universities. Further, urban school systems in these areas could take advantage of relatively higher turnover rates by giving unspecified teacher contracts to especially talented or targeted pools of the teacher labor market--eliminating these same teachers from consideration by rural school systems. Also, rural areas do not offer the cultural and social opportunities that many urban students and teachers would expect in their life style.

(3) Highly qualified academic teachers were in less demand since different contexts required different teaching roles. In both urban and rural contexts teachers had to supervise extracurricular activities. However, in rural systems, teachers had to fit into the community.

(4) If teachers were so dissatisfied with their job that they chose to leave, discipline, lack of respect, lack of administrative and parental support, bureaucratic intrusions, and the "valuing of mediocrity" were the primary factors. Low pay and lack of career opportunities were not cited as such. Just as importantly, teachers who stayed reported similar dissatifactions.

(5) Teachers stayed because of a commitment to teaching, a love of children or adolescents, an unwillingness to move into business or industry, and a commitment to preserving a life style. However, because these teachers were alienated by their working conditions, they reported that they "recruit (their) students away teaching."

Based on our research, we would offer the following policy recommentations:

1. School systems should become more knowledgeable of and sensitive to labor market forces indigenous to their locale.

2. To recruit those presently not choosing to teach, school systems must attend to the school milieu which presently frustrates and alienates teachers.

3. Legislatures and state education agencies should provide mechanisms for all school systems which permit them to be more flexible in their recruiting and hiring processes.

4. Given the auxiliary and extracurricular functions required of schools, staff support for teachers needs to be expanded.

5. Urban school systems (with nearby industry and universities) have added capability to attract teachers who are not now choosing to teach. They can:

   - o promote the hiring of able, but noncertified teachers and assist them in receiving certification while they are teaching;
   - o Work with industry to recruit spouses of employees transferring into the locale;
   - o Recruit and hire capable college graduates in high demand areas (such as math, science, special education) for short-term periods, and in turn, pay for their masters degrees and help place them in local industries.

6. Rural school systems can market the benefits of non-urban living much as industry does in attracting talented graduates to their rural industrial sites.

7. If career ladders are to have a positive impact on the teacher labor market, local systems and state education agencies need to address the divergent mobility patterns between urban and rural teachers.

8. Teacher pay needs to be increased. However, this is not because of its potential effect on the labor market. Rather, it is a direct expression of how society values education and teaching.

Obviously, qualitative research leads to dramatically different policy implications than those of quantitative research. In essence, quantitative research gives the policy maker a scientific analysis of the perspective of an outsider; however, qualitative research reveals the social context and salient characteristics of the perspective of insiders. Both are useful, but each has different uses. With regard to the teacher labor market, it appears

that quantitative research is useful in making a statement of the general nature of the overall situation and may suggest general trends. It does not, however, provide the specifics necessary for local implementation. Qualitative research, concerned as it is with the local social context and crucial "local knowledge" (Geertz, 1983), is necessary for policy and policy implementation. Acting on recent quantitative analyses of the teacher labor market, decision makers are enacting policies (such as career ladders and incentive pay programs) in order to:

(1) decrease high teacher turnover,
(2) provide the opportunity for teachers to receive more pay (by managing adults), and
(3) provide more money for meritorious teachers.

Our research convinces us that:

> The obvious facts about the teaching career are not so obvious after all (Charters, 1967, p. 182).

Such is the qualitative critque of teacher labor market studies.

TABLE A

SCHOOL SYSTEMS

SYSTEM	COUNTY DEMOGRAPHICS	CONTEXT	ENROLLMENT: STUDENTS AND TEACHERS	WHO INTERVIEWED*					
				TOTAL	CO	P	T:	ELEM	INT	SEC
I	Metro Area; Population, 300,000; **MFI = $18,600	Inner City System; White; Site of Major State University	30,000 Students (75% Black); 2,000 Teachers (60% White)	20:	2	3	15:	3	5	7
II	Metro Area; Population, 500,000; MFI = $22,000	Urban, Suburban, Rural System; Top Salary Supplement Paid to Teachers; 13% Local Teaching Positions; Many Universities in Area	70,000 Students (40% Black); 4,000 Teachers (70% White)	37:	3	4	30:	[illegible]	9	15
III	Rural Area; Population, 20,000; County Seat Population, 700; MFI = $11,100	No Industry, No Shopping Centers, Few Government Jobs; Church Important to Community; Nearest University 100 Miles Away	4,500 Students (80% Black); 275 Teachers (35% White)	10:	2	2	6:	0	2	4

**MFI is 1980 Median Family Income for county in which school system is located

(Source: County and City Data Book 1983, United States Department of Commerce)

*CO = Central Office
P = Principal
T = Teacher
E = Elementary
I = Intermediate)
S = Secondary

TABLE A

SCHOOL SYSTEMS (cont'd)

SYSTEM	COUNTY DEMOGRAPHICS	CONTEXT	ENROLLMENT STUDENTS AND TEACHERS	WHO INTERVIEWED*						
				TOTAL	CO	P	T:	ELEM	INT	SEC
IV	Rural Area; Population, 26,000; County Seat Population, 6,000; MFI = $13,800	Some Industry; 50 Local Teaching Positions; Nearest University 30 Miles Away	5,500 Students (56% Black); 320 Teachers (62% White)	16:	2	2	12:	5	0	7
V	Metro Area; Population, 300,000; MFI = $19,600	Mostly Suburban and Rural as Inner City Has Own School System; White Flight in the Past; Many Universities in Area	24,000 Students (18% Black); 13,000 Teachers (86% White)	11:	1	2	8:	0	5	3
VI	Rural Area; Population, 32,000; MFI = $14,500	Site of Major State University; 23 Local Teaching Positions; College Town of 10,000 People	5,000 Students (17% Black); 270 Teachers ("All White")	13:	2	2	9:	2	1	6

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TABLE B

UNIVERSITIES

UNIVERSITY	LOCATION	SCHOOL HISTORY	APPROXIMATE ENROLLMENT: UNIVERSITY/EDUCATION/ UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION	STUDENT BACKGROUND	WHO INTERVIEWED* TOTAL:	E	P	S
I	City Population, 60,000; Surrounding Area, Rural; Military Base	Black College	2,500/ 400/ 240	Many Rural First-Generation College; Military Dependents; Community College Transfers	12:	3	1	8
II	City Population, 35,000; Surrounding Area, Rural	White Teachers' College	13,000/ 1,900/ 1,300	Many Rural First Generation College; Some Urban Students Unable to Enter Other Universities	10:	1	1	8
III	City Population, 175,000; Major Metro	White Female Teachers' College	10,000/ 1,300/ 800	Daughters of Female Alumnae; Community College Transfers	11:	2	1	8

*E = School or Department of Education officials (dean, professor, student teaching coordinators)
P = University Placement Officials
S = Education Students

TABLE B

UNIVERSITIES (cont'd)

UNIVERSITY	LOCATION	SCHOOL HISTORY	APPROXIMATE ENROLLMENT: UNIVERISTY/EDUCATION/ UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION	STUDENT BACKGROUND	WHO INTERVIEWED* TOTAL:	E	P	S
IV	City Population, 10,000; Resort and Urban College Town	White Teachers' College	10,000/ 1,600/ 1,200	Many Rural First-Generation College; Many Urban Students See School As "Fun Place"	15:	2	2	11
V	City Population, 35,000; College Town	Major Research University	20,000/ 675/ 350	Urban; If from Rural, High SATs; Many Second-Generation College	13:	4	1	8
VI	City Population, 150,000; Major Metro Area	Black College	5,000/ 375/ 250	Many Rural First-Generation College; Many Children of Teachers	12:	3	1	8

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